In Search of Canadian Values

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By Marcel C. Ernst

The refugee crisis has revived the longstanding debate on Canadian values, an issue that last came to a head during the 1995 Québec Referendum. The history of this country can be divided into three main periods of prevailing values. First came several thousand years of a nomadic aboriginal "land ethic," represented by the Inuit and their southern cousins, the Algonquin, Cree, Iroquois and others. With European colonialization, the spread of Christian values began, along with property, legal tender, and law enforcement by uniformed RCMP. Finally, multiculturalism became official government policy during the early 1980s, characterized by prohibition of discrimination, including freedom of and from religion when desired.

Following in the footsteps of Jacques Cartier (1491-1557), Samuel de Champlain (1574-1635) founded New France and Québec City in July 1608. The British began permanent settlement at the same time further south: the London Company had established Virginia (named after Elizabeth I) the year before, as the first English colony in the New World. North of the 50th parallel, armed conflict ensued between the European settlers of different faiths, occasionally by proxy. Aboriginals allied themselves with one side or the other. French-English rapprochement following the formers' defeat at the Plains of Abraham in 1759 set a precedent for compromise, and ultimately accommodating cultural diversity. Anglican Brits settled in Upper, while the Catholic French resided in Lower Canada. In 1841 the two parts became united in the Province of Canada, a British colony.

For decades after Confederation in 1867, the young country's dominant values continued to reflect British customs, including class divisions and protectionism. Canada's social contract consisted of the "two solitudes," English and French. As the term implies, the two did not really mix. The French origins of European settlement in Canada remained somewhat undervalued until the 1896 election, which resulted in the first French-Canadian prime minister, Wilfrid Laurier, now immortalized on the five-dollar-bill. Immigrants from other countries ranked well below the two founding peoples, and were expected to adapt. In addition, social stratification separated the "professional" white Europeans from the mostly Asian blue collar workers who built Canada's railroad infrastructure and the Rideau Canal.

The media reported extensively on the negative aspects of pre-multicultural Canada, beginning with racist legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which kept that group from obtaining citizenship on the West Coast. During the Second World War, residents of Japanese origin suffered internment due to suspicion about their loyalties, although German-Canadians did not. An anti-Semitic minister in charge of immigration prevented persecuted Jews from entering the country. In Québec, the Catholic Church ran the schools and the English elite the economy, right into the 1950s. However, British common law provided some relief from entrenched, backward attitudes and prejudice. In 1919 the Persons Case, albeit ultimately decided in London, concluded that women were a party to the British North America Act and had the same rights as men. Aboriginal peoples did not obtain that kind of respect for decades, although a majority had been officially recognized as Status Indians. Many of their children were uprooted and converted to Christianity in residential schools.[1]

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[1] By 1998, the federal government made a formal apology for the residential schools policy and approved a $ 350 million healing fund.

Canadian mainstream values began to shift in the 1960s, when the young rebelled against the stuffiness of their parents. Prime Minister Diefenbaker's Bill of Rights and his vision of "unhyphenated Canadians" represented the first steps towards a more open society. In Québec, *la Révolution tranquille* (the quiet revolution) gradually shifted power to French-speaking residents. The Canadian Maple Leaf flag, finalized in time for the 1967 Centennial, helped crystallize a sense of national identity. Pierre Trudeau attracted attention as Justice Minister when he introduced no-fault divorce. Elected PM in 1968, he made federal services bilingual the year after, and patriated the Constitution Act in 1982. Henceforth the Commonwealth country would have a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which gave women and minorities recourse against discrimination. Multiculturalism followed, including affirmative action for aboriginals and other visible minorities in the public service. However, it was not until 2015 that the federal cabinet achieved gender balance.

Shortly after his election that October, Justin Trudeau told the *New York Times* that "there is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada." Instead, the new PM saw the country defined by a "pan-cultural heritage," characterized by "shared values – openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, to search for equality and justice."[1] Not everyone views things in such idealistic terms. Conservative leadership candidate Kellie Leitch remains skeptical about openness to all: "People who believe women are property – that the can be beaten, bought or sold, or that gays or lesbians can be stoned because of who they love – don't share Canadian values." Her concerns certainly adhere to Mill's harm principle, which states that the only legitimate way to restrict freedom is to prevent harm to others.

Anne Kingston observed that championing "Canadian values" has seen Leitch's approval ratings rise to 28% from 12% in April 2016, according to a Mainstreet Research telephone poll, although her disapproval rating also nearly doubled to 23% from 12%. To be sure, taking a stand like Ms. Leitch did forces people to scrutinize their personal convictions and, yes, value sets. Thus, more voters have jumped off the fence, either agreeing or disagreeing with her stance. Such polarization is not necessarily a bad thing. It helps answer the question "what do Canadians stand for?"

Indeed, how do average Canadians approach the values question? An Environics poll conducted in 2011 revealed that 97% of "settled Canadians" see adoption of "gender equality" and "tolerance of others" as primary Canadian values, a perspective shared by 96 percent of immigrants. A recent increase in terrorism-related activity may have lowered that tolerance. A phone survey of 1,370 adult Canadians in early September 2016, conducted for the *Toronto Star,* found that 67% agreed immigrants should be screened for "anti-Canadian values." This agreement crossed party lines, including 87% of Conservatives, 57% of Liberals and 59% of New Democrat voters. Yet, broad consensus of what may constitute "anti-Canadian" remains elusive. Would insistence on the right to bear arms qualify as such; or would preferring to cover one's face in public?

Notwithstanding such bothersome questions, the Canadian cultural mosaic contrasts positively with the US melting pot concept. The latter touts the advantages on assimilating newcomers: have them eat burgers, drink coke or Budweiser, and attend baseball games. A certain degree of anti-intellectualism pervades this Americanization effort, especially since conservatives consider many institutions of higher learning leftist. Following that suspicion, former US presidential candidate Ted Cruz proposed abolishing the US Department of Education. *Un-American* used to be a code word for communist sympathizers during the Cold War. Canadian anti-communism and anti-extremism have been more restrained, especially since the northern neighbour's parties represent a broader range of colours on the political palette. Red (Liberal), blue (Conservative), orange (New Democrat) and green (Green Party) dominate, but are supplemented by others such as Libertarians and Marxist-Leninists.

Respect for the environment is something many residents subscribe to, despite (or perhaps because of) living in a harsh climate, with hot humid summers and near-arctic winters. British Columbians have it a little easier. Such conditions have made the country's economy fairly energy-intensive. Thus, Alberta's oil boom initially came as a blessing, bolstering the country's relative immunity from Middle Eastern oil shortages. More recently, the collapse in world oil prices has triggered a severe recession in that province, and contributed to a decline in the value of the Canadian dollar. This development has made shifting energy production away from fossil fuels more feasible. The Trudeau government signed on to COP21 in December 2015, pledging to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In October 2016 the PM announced his plan for carbon pricing, in partial fulfillment of that pledge. The plan includes a deadline (some may call it an ultimatum) for provinces to come up with carbon pricing or a cap-and-trade system by 2018. Failing that, the federal government will put its own system in place.

The national unity debates of the 1990s have thus given way to resource-based tensions. Trudeau's approval of a liquefied natural gas pipeline shortly before the carbon plan announcement symbolizes the difficult balancing act between meeting immediate energy needs and implementing longer-term environmental commitments. The aboriginal Haida affected by the decision fear "potential impacts on a nearby salmon run, the second-largest in the country."[2] Carbon pricing in BC will be the consequence, and set a precedent for things to come in the rest of the country. Quebec may also serve as a model, given the province's reliance on environmentally sustainable hydro development and the cap-and-trade regime introduced by the former Charest government. Saskatchewan's reluctance to sign on to such a commitment, as well as aboriginal and environmentalist opposition to any further fossil fuel development may well complicate matters.

Controversy also ensued over the PM's championing of BC's Site C dam, a project first approved by Harper in 2014, despite a review panel's findings that it "would have a significant impact on First Nations' use of land and resources," including the flooding of 12,000-year-old Dane-zaa historical sites.[3] Trudeau's government already issued construction permits, even though Treaty 8 nations have been contesting the matter in federal court. B.C.'s aboriginal communities feel betrayed, decrying Ottawa's apparent about-face after having pledged a new nation-to-nation relationship with them. Yet, Trudeau has launched the long-sought inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, and has dedicated substantial funds towards improving water quality on aboriginal reserves. As well, the Algonquins in Ontario have concluded a new land treaty after many years of inaction.

These contradictions mirror the Canadian mosaic, a patchwork of regionally diverse values. The values often conflict, that is why coming up with a national strategy on anything is such a formidable challenge in a thinly populated country with a lot of natural resources, a history of aboriginal grievances, regional disparities, and resultant activism. These disparities resulted in the formation of the separatist Partie Québécois in the East (and two failed referendums on independence) and the now-defunct Reform Party in the West. The urban-rural divide continues to be reflected at the ballot box, with most farmers voting Conservative and many city dwellers voting Liberal. Only the NDP seems to transcend those divisions. The Green Party may yet benefit from growing environmental concerns. Do the values Canadians can agree on have universal applicability? To some extent, the answer may well be yes, given the country's tradition of "order and good government," multicultural orientation and disproportional impact on the world stage as peacekeeper and mediator. On the other hand, its privileged position, with plenty of water, relatively unspoiled nature and geopolitical isolation is shared by few other UN members.

In her influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs remarked: "Does anyone suppose that, in real life, answers to any of the great questions that worry us

today are going to come out of homogeneous settlements?"[4] Not many other countries enjoy the same extent of freedom, compassion and social tolerance. Despite some fears and tensions, those values have become a source of national pride for Canadians, particularly after the contentious US presidential election of 2016. The northern loyalists and the southern revolutionaries continue to take separate paths to self-expression. Canucks of all beliefs and political stripes tend to agree on one thing: they don't want to be Americans.

Notes

[1] Anne Kingston (2016). "Values Testing Canada." *MacLean's*, October 3.

[2] Nancy MacDonald (2016). "From Hope to Fury in 12 Months." *MacLean's*, October 24, pp. 24-5.

[3] MacDonald, p. 25

[4] Jane Jacobs (1992). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* New York: Vintage Books, p. 448.